

International film audiences: Industrial and academic perspectives – Part 1

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The work towards the following two themed sections of *Participations*, reflecting academic and industrial perspectives on international film audiences, began what feels like a lifetime ago. At the beginning of 2019 we sought funding for a conference which would turn out to be unique not only in terms of its topic and scope but also in the medium of its delivery and the possibility for new connections made across professional sectors and national borders. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the event took place online in September 2020. Regardless of the radical change in organisation and delivery, it still proved current and thought-provoking. The conference featured experts and new voices across academia (including sociology, history, media, communication and culture, film and television studies) and industry (media businesses, cultural institutions and government bodies). The conference programme¹ centred on the essential movements and migrations across the globe which help (re-)conceptualise cinema and its audiences within the continuum of identity formation, transnational economies, class mobility, border permeability and technological innovation. Moving the event online helped attract hundreds of attendees from across six continents and clearly illustrated the significance of putting academic research in dialogue with the work of creative industry professionals and analysts.

In the two themed sections we continue to favour this holistic approach to studying film audiences. The aim is to trace the multiplicity and changeability of film-viewing experiences and cultures across a variety of historical periods, geographical locations, national sensibilities as well as political and economic realities. The first themed section includes five academic research articles, one industry expert reflection and three interviews with film and media specialists. The pieces broadly cover research into memories, personal and public archives, and geographies of historical cinema-going, as well as trends in contemporary festival programming, audience development initiatives and cinephilia in the wake of COVID-19. This purposefully eclectic collection, featuring diverse voices, methods, theoretical backgrounds and formats, reflects the rising interest in studying film audiences and general consumer behaviour (in both academia and the industry) through sociological

surveys and oral history interviews, archival research, expert opinions, big data analyses as well as real life and social media interactions. What unites the pieces within this themed section is a preoccupation with the special role which cinema (and its modern televisual and online permutations) takes in the cultural and social lives of the case-study individuals, communities, organisations, cities and nations. The questions of space, place and the role of technology in shaping audience interactions with the filmic medium weave an implicit thread throughout all the pieces included.

In the first article, Daniela Treveri-Gennari, Lies Van de Vijver and Pierluigi Ercole of the European Cinema Audiences project present a typology of cinemas, utilising price proxy and systematic cinema classification which prove insightful when applied in comparative contexts. The research team analyse programming and exhibition data across seven European cities – Bari (Italy), Leicester (United Kingdom), Ghent (Belgium), Rotterdam (The Netherlands), Gothenburg (Sweden), Brno (Czechoslovakia) and Magdeburg (East Germany) – for the years 1951 to 1953 which allows them to extrapolate findings on national and international hierarchies of exhibition. Their contribution addresses the lack of a Europe-wide classification of cinema theatres in the period under scrutiny and answers the recent call of the New Cinema History movement for more sustained comparative efforts into research across national contexts and borders, which can serve to undermine absolutist notions when conceptualising film cultures across the globe.

Transitioning from the historical to the contemporary context of film consumption geographies, İlke Şanlıer Yüksel and Aydın Çam examine newspaper archival materials and oral histories of cinema-going in 1960-1980 (the so-called Golden Era of the Turkish cinema industry) in Adana and the Çukurova region in order to compare them to participatory observations and in-depth interviews conducted in 2019 and 2020. They note the role of migratory patterns, new technologies and socio-political issues in defining and/or disrupting exhibition activities, continuously reaffirming the resilience and significance of communal film-watching. Employing Foucault's notion of heterotopic spaces, the authors reflect on the multiplicity of experiences which non-traditional and event exhibition initiatives allow for. They observe a revitalisation of outdoor film-viewing, in particular, and reflect on its role as a new space for socialization, especially during the pandemic.

Similarly relying on film memories of sociability but also interrogating experiences of physical migration, Dalila Missero discusses the findings of a qualitative research project, which focuses on the past and present cinema-going activities of an intergenerational group of Latin American women living in Barcelona and Milan. Missero offers a thematic analysis of migrant cinema-memories to read broader practices of home-making, mobility, transnational relationships, and digital ecologies. The article shows that an interdisciplinary methodology, combining feminist audience studies, memory studies and migration research, represents a valuable key to understanding contemporary audience formations and calls for a broader exploration of migrant cinematic memory as a necessary, interdisciplinary perspective on the transnational and gendered aspects of the contemporary audience experience.

Further zooming in on the microcosm of personal film experiences and archives, Maria Ida Bernabei and Andrea Mariani delve into local cinema history through the scrapbooks, assembled by cinephile and amateur filmmaker Water Faglioni (of the city of Udine). The unique collection consists of diary entries, newspaper clippings and film reflections, dating from 1926 to 1999. Their detailed analysis of Faglioni's scrapbooks reveals an exceptionally sophisticated and multi-faceted encyclopaedic perspective on film viewing experience and habits. The work forms a valuable source of information on the microhistory of the film circulation in the city of Udine, the impact of TV culture on local film consumption, the critical impulse toward film knowledge that characterizes a given cinephile culture, and the multilayered complexity of ephemeral media as personal archives.

Another article which, similarly to Yüksel and Çam's contribution, focuses on the pandemic, but this time in the context of the changing practices of young cinephiles in the city of Ghent (Belgium) comes from Salma Mediavilla Aboulaoula and Daniel Biltereyst. Their mixed-method study compares young cinephile habits pre- and post-COVID-19. As cinemas close down and festivals are postponed, Mediavilla Aboulaoula and Biltereyst look into how the film and cinema experiences of cinephile respondents have been impacted, focusing on 'quarantine' film consumption habits and experiences in a domestic and online environment. The authors notice a new form of hybrid cinephilia, developing on the basis of technologies, community building and special experiences. Thus, they argue for the need for a more inclusive definition of the term, which can account for the continued love of interacting with film in moments of historical and social crisis, like the pandemic.

In a similar vein, Laëtitia Kulyk, Managing Director of the *Guilde française des scénaristes* in France, reflects on the development of audiences for specialised film in the context of her experience managing the Francophone Film Festival of Greece. In this expert piece, Kulyk considers issues in contemporary festival organisation, especially when it comes to attracting younger viewers. She examines the application and success of different initiatives, conducted to develop the audience, change the image of the festival and attract the youngest viewers. It is a self-reflexive and critically charged piece which clearly outlines the reasoning and motivations behind the chosen methodology of systematic action. The results could be of help to any professional involved in cultural management projects and could also constitute a good start to a more general reflection on best practice in engaging the local population with cultural events.

Another piece which recounts the experiences of film distributors and exhibitors is Anna Blagrove's semi-structured interview with Catharine des Forges, Director of the UK Independent Cinema Office (ICO). Des Forges is asked to reflect on topical issues, such as: the changes which the organisation underwent since its creation; the state of the national and international exhibition sector; the challenges independent cinema venues across the UK face in the wake of the pandemic and Brexit; and the importance of industry inclusivity and audience engagement initiatives. The interview highlights the significance of adaptation and innovation within the sector, when faced with the rapid expansion in digital film distribution and consumption.

In line with the focus on cinema venues and exhibition, Maya Nedyalkova interviews researcher and photographer Philip Jablon on the development of his Southeast Asia Movie Theatre Project, his calls for architectural preservation and the role which stand-alone cinema theatres played (and, in some cases, continue to play) in Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. Jablon sheds light on a geographical region which rarely receives enough sustained attention in Western media scholarship. He usefully draws comparisons across national contexts, provides background information on the cultural and political developments in the respective countries, and explains the role of Hollywood, transnational film distribution and demographic changes for the demise of older exhibition venues.

Contrasting historical cinema-going in Southeast Asia with contemporary film-viewing during the pandemic in the UK, Daniela Treveri Gennari speaks with Leslie Montgomery Sheldon, director of YourScreen - a virtual cinema platform, partnering with independent and community cinemas to stream new and acclaimed films from around the world. The interview focuses on the genesis of the YourScreen idea, the way the platform functions in relation to its partners and programming, as well as the immediate and long-term effects of the pandemic on alternative exhibition venues and their audiences. It underscores the importance of differentiation when entering the highly saturated video-on-demand market and the increasingly significant function of (new) international content in attracting viewer interest.

As it becomes evident, this special themed section adopts a multi-disciplinary approach to film audiences highlighting not only the academic, but also the economic and societal impact of the works included. This publication takes place at a vital and controversial moment for film exhibition, where digital advancement and global pandemic measures have proven disruptive catalysts for changes in the physical spaces of film consumption, distribution windows and viewing patterns. Now, more than ever, we need to take into account historical and contemporary audience developments, global and local specificities, individual experiences, statistical data and the opinions of professionals and specialists in seeking sustainability and understanding change within the sector. The two themed sections aim to be inclusive in showcasing innovative audience and reception work and studies across the globe. In this way we aim for inclusivity and plurality of different international discourses, implicitly counteracting dominant narratives of what constitutes engagement with film culture.

Note:

¹ <https://sites.google.com/brookes.ac.uk/film-audience-conference2020/programme-videos>.